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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000607

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: NATIONALIST OPPOSITION LOOKING TO CASHING  
IN ON PARTY CLOSURE

REF: ANKARA 553

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, for Reasons 1.4 (b  
,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) since its entry into parliament in July 2007 has shrewdly managed to corner the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and exploit its weaknesses. MHP is keenly aware that hiving off votes from AKP is its only hope to strengthen its base. MHP has steered a course, opportunistic and well-played, that is credible both in the eyes of conservative Turks and, in a backward way, for the state. If the current legal process against AKP succeeds in disbanding the party, MHP is positioning itself to feast on the remains. END SUMMARY.

Shaping a New "Constructive Opposition"

12. (C) MHP's first act after the parliamentary election was to participate in the August 2007 election of presidential candidate Abdullah Gul. Although MHP voted for its own candidate, the act of showing up (along with the tiny Democratic Left Party) pushed attendance over the 367 quorum threshold set by the Constitutional Court last May, after which opposition parties' boycott forced the government to call early elections. MHP administrators were criticized for enabling Gul's election, but they cast themselves as advocates of democracy and claimed AKP would bear the responsibility for electing the president.

13. (C) Since then, MHP has struggled to carve out its territory against AKP, working to distinguish itself from the counter-productive and impotent squirmings of the Republican People's Party (CHP). MHP found some purchase on AKP's constitutional revision project, but as that ambitious program moved to the back burner there was less to attack. More fruitful was the lack of military action early last fall against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Northern Iraq -- MHP labeled some AKPers "separatists" -- but when Turkey finally launched airstrikes across the border in December, MHP Vice Chairman and party whip Oktay Vural acknowledged it had become harder for MHP to exploit government inaction.

14. (C) The constitutional headscarf amendments returned MHP

to center stage. When PM Erdogan in January suggested the headscarf ban at universities could be resolved in a single sentence, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli jumped on the opening. While criticizing the PM for not seeking compromise, he declared MHP's opposition to the ban and proposed parliament take up the issue immediately, without waiting for more comprehensive constitutional reform, on the basis of equal access to public services. MHP distinguished between service providers and service receivers -- in a secular state, only the latter should be permitted to wear the headscarf in the government domain. In short order, the two parties hammered out revised constitutional language on both equal access and the right to education and agreed to amend Article 17 of the Higher Education (YOK) Law, regulating attire at universities. The controversial effort to lift the ban stalled out when CHP applied to the Constitutional Court to review the amendments.

#### The Devil (and Salvation) in the Details

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¶5. (C) The proposed YOK Law revision was MHP's opportunity to side-step the controversy and leave AKP holding the bag. By maintaining firmly that only kerchief-style headcoverings tied under the chin should be allowed in universities, MHP staked out ground that appeared supportive of religious tenets, nationalist, and opposed to AKP. The kerchief style is truly Anatolian, they claim; the "turban" style associated more with AKP is "foreign" and a "political symbol." Should a young woman believe her head must be covered for reasons of faith, then let her do so in an "authentically Turkish style," argues Hediye Akdere, MHP Women's Auxiliary Chair. AKP's Education Committee chairman tells us the party has no intention of bringing forward MHP's turban-exclusive

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language, leaving MHP free to accuse AKP of bad faith.

#### AKP's Party Closure Case

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¶6. (C) MHP officials have been virtually jovial since the March 14 indictment seeking to close the ruling party, making clear that an apparently principled stand is a tool to dig into AKP. They claim to oppose party closure while remaining utterly uninterested in explaining how to prevent it. Oktay Vural explains that Turkey must somehow strike a balance between protecting parties ("the sine qua non institution of democracy") and protecting democracy itself against the ravages of AKP -- a party MHP officials variously tell us does or does not have an Islamic agenda.

¶7. (C) MHP's leaked proposal to amend the constitution involves eliminating party closures, but expanding the punishment on individuals to a lifetime political ban, vice the current five-year ban. MHP Secretary General Cihan Pacaci admits his party has no intention of accepting AKP's expected counterproposal to amend the constitution to prevent party closures -- instead they will force AKP to take sole responsibility for the amendment effort and for going to referendum.

#### Traditional Allies Appear at Odds

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¶8. (C) The tricky line MHP is walking has placed genuine strain on MHP's long-standing affinity with the military. MHP facilitated Gul's election, despite the Turkish General Staff's (TGS) April 27, 2007 e-memo, which made clear that Gul was an unsuitable candidate from the military perspective. In December, Kirikkale deputy and former Health Minister Osman Durmus called on CHOD General Yasar Buyukanit to resign for having allowed legalization and politicization of PKK terrorists in the form of pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) MPs' entry into parliament. Although Vice Chairman Vural denied Durmus was speaking for the party, he also dismissed the prospect that the party, known for its rigid discipline, would punish Durmus.

¶9. (C) One little-noted event gives some indication of the mistrust and mutual animosity between MHP and the military. In January, a group of retired officers and their fur-clad wives arrived at MHP headquarters to deliver a black wreath to express outrage at MHP's stance on lifting the headscarf ban. MHP members literally chased the retired officers and their wives down the street, tossing the wreath after them. Bitterness reached a peak at the beginning of March after the military pulled back from its cross-border ground operation; Bahceli accused the military of legitimizing the PKK through use of military terms like "command and control center," and the CHOD called the accusations "treasonous" (reftel).

¶10. (C) COMMENT. Polls show MHP holding at the 13-14 percent range -- what it garnered in the July 2007 elections. But MHP is poised to make the most of the pending closure case, whether AKP is closed or splinters under the threat of closure. National security analyst Faruk Demir assesses that MHP has played the role of catalyst since entering parliament: it has repeatedly instigated fundamental change in its environment, but somehow side-stepped the consequences of the chemical reaction. From Gul's presidential election to the headscarf amendments, MHP has played the role of AKP enabler, without becoming irrevocably tainted by association. Bahceli has thrown AKP leaders off their reform game and embroiled them in political controversies. At the same time, MHP's cooler relationship with the military comports with the public's message last July that soldiers should steer clear of politics. In retrospect, the noose that Devlet Bahceli famously threw to the crowds at election rallies may not have been for jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, but may have been intended for AKP to hang itself. END COMMENT.

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